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The Karelian language
in Finland: An Overview of a
Language in Context

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During the initial stage of the research project ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All) in 2010, "structured context analyses" of each speaker community at issue were prepared. These context analyses will act as a starting point for further deepened research by linguists, sociologists and lawyers. Thus, they will form the basis of further case-specific reports and the comparative report which will be the main outcome of the whole project. However, as these will be available for interested readers only at the end of the project, we wanted to publish shorter versions summarising our work so far already at this stage, thus providing up-to-date information for both the academic community and stakeholder groups. This paper, based on the context analysis by Anneli Sarhimaa, gives a brief and up-to-date overview of the status of and research about the Karelian language in Finland.

As all papers appearing in the series Working Papers in European Language Diversity, these context analyses have been subject to an anonymous peer-reviewing process. Whenever the present document is referred to, due reference to the author and the ELDIA project should be made. For more information about the ELDIA project see <http://www.eldia-project.org/>.

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1 Introduction: Speakers of Karelian in Finland

Karelian in Finland. Karelian is an autochthonous minority language in Finland where it has been spoken as long as Finnish itself. By the mid-20th century this historical territorial minority language became a non-territorial one through four waves of migration triggered by the two World Wars. Until WWII the traditional dwelling places of the Karelian speaking population in Finland comprised of six Border Karelian municipalities and a few further border villages in Finland's Northern Karelia. Prior to WWII a few hundred Karelians lived in the Petsamo area in the north-easternmost part of Finland as well. During the first half of the 20th century there were several waves of refugees into Finland from Karelian speaking areas in north-western Russia, especially from Viena. Before WWII, a notable number of the refugees had settled in the timber industry centres of northern Finland, especially in and around Kemi. Later on, as a consequence of WWII, the predominant majority of speakers of Karelian lost their traditional dwelling sites and were resettled in different parts of Finland. Today there are speakers of Karelian living all over Finland; the present-day locations of the speakers include Valtimo and Nurmes in the eastern part of Finland and Muhos in the western part in the neighbourhood of Oulu as well as the cities of Helsinki, Lahti, Kuopio, Jyväskylä, Joensuu, Kotka, Tampere and Oulu.

Demography. Speakers of Karelian are not represented in population censuses or any other administrative registers. It has been estimated that those speakers of Karelian who were resettled in other parts of Finland during and after WWII numbered 30,000-40,000 persons, and that the largest wave of refugees from Russian Karelia in 1917-1922 comprised of some 33,500 persons, out of whom around 20,000 remained in Finland permanently. The Karelian Language Society has compiled unofficial statistics since 1995. According to the society's estimation there are today roughly 5,000 speakers of the Karelian language in Finland, and up to 20,000 persons who know some Karelian or understand it to some extent.

Ethnic identity and self-image. Today speakers of Karelian in Finland are completely integrated into the majority population and primarily define themselves as "Finns who have their roots in Karelia". According to a study conducted in the 1980s (Heikkinen 1989), the self-image of Border Karelians primarily consisted of their ethnic language and their Orthodox faith. The understanding of Karelian culture by the oldest generation born in Border Karelia was revealed to drastically differ from that of the younger generations born after WWII. Hitherto there has been no research on which new cultural symbols actually contribute to the construction of being Karelian in Finland today.

2 Socio-political Context

2.1 Legal and Political Position

Legislative frame and status. In Finland the legal statuses of languages are directed by the Constitution, the Language Act, the Sámi Language Act and a Statute which defines the languages that enjoy the protection of the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages and the European Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities. The Constitution and the Language Act prescribe Finnish and Swedish as national languages and Sámi as a constitutionally recognised indigenous language; the Sámi Language Act defines the language rights of the Sámi in more detail. Paragraph 17 of the Constitution furnishes the Sámi (“as the indigenous people”) and “the Roma and other groups” with the right to maintain and to develop their own languages and cultures. In other words, in the Finnish legislation Karelian is subsumed under more than a hundred “other” languages spoken in Finland. In a similar vein, legislation concerning education seeks to safeguard the rights of the speakers of all other languages to learn and thus to maintain their heritage languages. Yet this appears to favour recent migrant groups and their languages to the cost of the traditional minority languages. For instance, certain state subventions can only be granted for the instruction of migrant languages, whereas stricter criteria have been applied to the heritage language instruction of Karelian; several budget and other parliamentary initiatives regarding state support for Karelian have been rejected over the past couple of years.

A Regional or Minority Language. Finland ratified the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages in 1994 and the European Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities in 1998. The languages defined as Regional or Minority Languages are prescribed in the Statute on the Implementation of the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages. On 27.11.2009 the Parliament of Finland decided to amend the Statute and include Karelian as a non-regional minority language alongside Romanes. This first ever official recognition of Karelian as a minority language in Finland furnishes Karelian-speaking children with the right to receive instruction in their heritage language (see Perusopetuslaki/Basic Education Act 628/21.8.1998, § 10 Opetuskieli/Language of instruction). This is accompanied by the possibility of getting state subsidies for arranging such instruction. The statute amendment does not, however, really change the legal status of Karelian in Finland in practice. Further measures need to be taken via additional amendments. The statute amendment has not had any legislative consequences yet, but several initiatives have been made by the Society of Karelian Language Society that are being processed within various administrative instances. The most notable initiative would be to achieve an amendment to the constitution which will explicitly define the Karelian language as an autochthonous minority language in paragraph 17.

Political controversies. Contrary to many minorities who have to struggle for their right to “belong” to the place they live in, speakers of Karelian must fight against political controversies caused by always having been straightforwardly included in the Finnish nation. Even today, arguments such as “it is not clear if Karelian is an independent language” are still sometimes heard in political debates and discussions between the representatives of Karelian organisations and Finnish authorities.

2.2 Attitudes

In post-WWII Finland the cultural and linguistic heritage of Karelian speakers was ignored and even condemned. No efforts were made by the state or the authorities to support the maintenance of the Karelian culture or language. On the contrary, in the immediate post-war years the combination of the Russian-sounding features of Karelian and the Orthodox faith of its speakers were generally experienced as “suspicious” and “un-Finnish”, and especially Karelian speaking children were encouraged and even forced to speak only Finnish, e.g., at school. This effectively restricted the domains for the use of Karelian and promoted the use of Finnish in inter-ethnic communication. The present-day interrelations of Karelians and Finns in Finland are still largely characterised by a combination of ignorance and (un)conscious marginalizing by the majority: the prevailing majority of Finns is to a very limited extent aware of the existence of Karelian as a language in its own right and of the Karelian speaking minority in Finland. During the past few years, the awareness and the knowledge of the Karelian language and culture has increased modestly in Finland.

3 Cultural Context

The contemporary culture of speakers of Karelian in Finland is characterised by multifaceted activities in the fields of literature, folklore, music, theatre, film and children’s culture.

Literature, folklore, music. There are quite a few authors who write in Karelian. During the past five years, a fair amount of textbooks and other learning materials for studying Karelian and updating one’s knowledge of traditional Karelian culture have seen the daylight. One source of the traditional Karelian culture is the Dictionary of Karelian, published 1968–2005 by the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland and the Finno-Ugric Society. The dictionary is freely accessible on the Internet (http://kaino.kotus.fi/cgi-bin/kks/kks_etusivu.cgi). There also is an introduction to information technology available in Karelian, a guide for translating into Karelian, another one for writing in Karelian, as well as a respectable number of audiobooks for adults and for children. Fiction written in Karelian is growing; there are already several children’s books (i.e. the translation of Tove Jansson’s ‘The Magician’s Hat’ and the ‘Dangerous Midsummer’, Mauri Kunnas’s ‘The Kalevala of Dogs’), quite a few adult books, collections of the best texts gathered via pan-Karelian writing contests and a couple of high-quality translations of Finnish pieces of literature into Karelian. The renewed interest in the Karelian language is also evident in numerous new music recordings.

Theatre and film. An especially discernible part of Karelian culture in Finland used to be the theatre. The amateur theatre group, *Karjalan Näyttämö* (‘Karelian Stage’) was founded in 1980 and accompanied by a summer theatre at the Bomba House for some time. The Bomba was built in 1977-78 to attract tourists to Nurmes to experience Border Karelian building culture, and later became an important cultural and educational centre. A professional Karelian theatre group, the *Kalevan Näyttämö* (Kaleva’s Stage’) was founded in 1984; it carried the main responsibility of the Bomba Summer Festival until 1993. The *Kalevan Näyttämö* offered a summer theatre programme in Anjalankoski and Helsinki in 1989. Entrance fees and sponsors financed 90-95% of the theatre’s

performances. In the 1990s the Theatre Law excluded *Kalevan Näyttämö* from all state subventions, and it had to be closed down during the recession in 1994. Since then the Finno-Ugric theatre festival is the sole remaining official event from successful Karelian dramatic art in Finland. In film, speakers of Karelian in Finland have been active in creating documentary films on Karelian traditional life, customs and culture; at the moment several productions are being filmed or planned.

Organisations and associations. There are numerous organisations dedicated to the maintenance and development of Karelian culture. The oldest is the Association for Education and Culture in Karelia (Fin. *Karjalan Sivistysseura*), which was founded in 1906 by Viena Karelian travelling salesmen. During the first decades of its existence it concentrated on helping refugees from northern Russian Karelia. The Finnish Karelian League (Fin. *Karjalan Liitto*) was established by Karelian municipality administrations, parishes and provincial organisations immediately after the Winter War in 1940. Numerous parish associations (Fin. *pitäjöseurat*) of Border Karelians were founded after WWII. The Karelian Language Society (Fin. *Karjalan Kielen Seura*) was established in 1994 and since then has expressly focused on maintaining and revitalising the Karelian language and fighting for the linguistic human rights of speakers of Karelian in Finland. There is also *Karjalaine radivo* (the Karelian Radio) available on the websites of the society including programmes about Karelian life in the Karelian language and Finnish.

Regular cultural events. Local seasonal festivals called *praazniekka* used to form an important part of the annual cycle of life in Border Karelia and in Viena. In the 1950s, Orthodox congregations revived the ritual, and today the most widely known is *the Il'an praazniekka*, the commemoration day of St. Elijah in Ilomantsi which, alongside Orthodox believers from all over Finland, attracts many tourists, since it is conceived and widely marketed as a cultural summer festival.

Cultural symbols. There are material cultural symbols that are stereotypically associated with the Karelian minority in Finland or, more generally, with the very essence of being Karelian (“Karelianness”): the traditional string instrument *kantele*, the (fake) Border-Karelian Bomba House, Karelian pastries (Fin. *karjalan piirakat*, Border Kar. *piiruad*, *šipanniekat*), other types of pastries (e.g., *sultsina* and *vatruska*); and the Karelian women’s folk costume *feresi*, to name but a few. Alongside the Karelian language these cultural symbols jointly form the “toolkit” of identifying or at least characterising the Karelian speaking minority in Finland. Yet unlike the central material cultural symbols of Sámi (most notably, the Sámi flag and the national costume), the cultural symbols of Karelian speakers are not standardised; one does not see them or hear about them at school and they are not used by authorities or institutions in any conventional way. Furthermore, some of the symbols (e.g., the Bomba House) have been deliberately productised in order to be employed by the “Karelian branch” of the tourism business in Finland, which in so doing has contributed to the construction of Karelian identity of speakers of Karelian and their descendants.

Artists and writers. Amongst artists with a Karelian-speaking background the most widely known are Oili Mäki, Viktor Kuusela, Pirkko Jauhiainen, Herman Joutsen, Taisto Martiskainen and the late Heikki Koukkunen. The famous Finnish composer Aulis Sallinen was born in Border Karelia but has not made it public whether or not he speaks Karelian. There also are numerous artists whose parents (or at least one of them) are known to have been speakers of Karelian (e.g., Juice Leskinen, Markku Paretškoi and Sanna-Mari Titov). The Karelian speaking actors of the *Kalevan Näyttämö* included

Paavo Liski, Seppo Huunonen, Seppo "Paroni" Paakkunainen, Matti Kuusela and Pertti Lampi. Current authors actively writing in Karelian in Finland include Pekka Ruotsi, Paavo Harakka, Viktor Kuusela, Anita Kulmala and Heikki Jeronen. The most productive non-fiction writers are Martti Penttonen, Raija Pyöli and Pertti Lampi.

Role of Orthodox religion. In pre-WWII Finland Karelian was predominantly spoken in prevalingly Orthodox municipalities, and so the Karelian language, Border Karelian roots and the Orthodox faith traditionally form the tripartite basis of being Karelian in Finland. After WWII the Orthodox congregations were, along with the municipality societies, the sole public domain in which Karelian was used. Today the traditional connection between being a speaker of Karelian in Finland and being Orthodox appears to be perhaps maintained and also manifested even more consciously than ever before. For instance, there are Karelian language clubs within the Orthodox congregations, and the congregations have also organised Karelian language courses. All in all, religion and religious symbols clearly characterise the Karelian speaking minority in Finland and distinguish it from the majority. However, no systematically gathered information is available on how many speakers of Karelian in Finland actually participate in the activities of and by the Orthodox congregations.

4 Language

4.1 General Description of the Language

Traditional varieties spoken in Finland. Linguistically the traditional Karelian speaking areas of Finland represented two different varieties of the Karelian language: In Ilomantsi, Korpiselkä and in some villages of Soanlahti, Suistamo, Suojärvi and Impilahti people spoke the southern dialects of Karelian Proper, whereas the remaining areas of Border Karelia was Olonets Karelian speaking. The pre-WWII refugees from Russian North Karelia spoke Viena Karelian varieties and thus brought yet a third Karelian variety into the linguistic landscape of Finland. Today, the majority of speakers of Karelian in Finland apparently speak Olonets Karelian which is also still spoken to the northwest of Lake Ladoga. There also still are speakers of Viena Karelian or Southern Karelian in Finland. These dialects are spoken in the central and the northern parts of the Republic of Karelia as well. Dialectal fragmentation is considered a problem for the unity of Karelian in general, but only with regard to the standard language: currently several literary standards are in use in Finland as well as in the Republic of Karelia.

Karelian and Finnish. Karelian belongs to the Finnic branch of the Uralic language family, more precisely to its eastern Finnic subgroup. The eastern Finnic subgroup can be distinguished from the southern and the western groups geographically, and on the basis of their joint, relatively recent historical developments. Traditionally seen, the eastern Finnic subgroup includes Karelian, Vepsian, Ingrian, and the eastern dialects of Finnish. The traditional Karelian and eastern Finnish varieties share a number of words of common origin which are not typical of the western or the southern

Finnic languages, including the western dialects of Finnish. There is also a host of inherited grammatical features that differentiate between the eastern and the western Finnish dialects but connect the eastern dialects with Karelian. Due to their relatively close genetic relatedness and the multifarious historical ties between Karelian and Finnish, especially the eastern Finnish dialects, lexical similarities have always supported a mutual intelligibility to a certain degree, at least at the most elementary levels of everyday communication. As to mutual intelligibility, the eastern Finnish dialects and the Karelian dialects form a rather smoothly-running dialect continuum within which mutual intelligibility is at its highest in the north and gradually diminishes towards the south.

Demarcation from Finnish speakers. When measured in terms of how speakers of Karelian in Finland identify their heritage language, self-demarcation from speakers of Finnish is not particularly clear. It is still customary to refer to the Karelian language in Finland as a mere dialect of Finnish or as dialects without any reference to a specific language (“Border-Karelian dialects”), and even to refer to the Finnish dialects spoken in the former provinces of Northern Karelia and Southern Karelia as “Karelian” or even “Karelian language”. Consequently, lay speakers of Karelian in Finland are often very vaguely, if at all, aware of actually being speakers of a language other than Finnish, although they are highly aware of the distinctiveness of their heritage variety from dialectal and/or colloquial Finnish. This is, first and foremost, due to the fact that in general the status of the Karelian language as an independent Finnic language was denied by many prominent scholars and politicians in Finland as well as in Russia and in the Soviet Union over a long period of time.

Standard Karelian and language cultivation. Olonets Karelian and Viena Karelian have been standardised in the Republic of Karelia since the late 1980s. In Finland written Olonets Karelian appears to be used more than Viena Karelian and South Karelian less than either of them. Prior the ELDIA project no information was available on how familiar speakers of Karelian in Finland are with the various written standards, or on the attitudes of speakers of Karelian in Finland towards written Karelian in general. Many Finland Karelians appear to see the current use of several literary standards in Finland as well as in the Republic of Karelia as the main hindrances in establishing Karelian as a modern standardised language. For the cultivation of Karelian in Finland an unofficial language board, the *Kieličuppu* ‘Language Corner’, is being established within the framework of the Karelian Language Society; its main task will be to discuss and to express opinions on questions of corpus planning concerning Karelian in general.

4.2 Language Contact and Multilingualism

Bilingualism. Today all speakers of Karelian are Karelian-Finnish bilinguals and, presumably, to many of them, Finnish is the dominant language. In any case, Finnish is the language that they use in most domains and the use of Karelian is largely restricted to private domains.

Results of language contacts with Finnish. So far no systematic research has been conducted on the contemporary Karelian varieties spoken in Finland. There also is no information available on the effects that the bilingualism or the putative multilingualism of speakers of Karelian shows or has shown on any of the languages that they know and use. Even the influence of Karelian-Finnish

language contacts on the traditional Karelian dialects of Finland have only been discussed in scholarly literature in one short article and only with regard to coordination and subordination, and Finnish loanwords (Turunen 1975, English version 1977).

4.3 Language Use and Maintenance

Main domains of use. Karelian is predominantly used in private domains but also serves as a means of communication within some semi-public domains such as the numerous municipality associations, congregations and language clubs as well as in a few internet fora. To some extent, Karelian is actively used in a variety of cultural domains (literature, music, theatre) as well as in the minority print media. In the public domains in general and in the prevailing majority of the semi-public domains, the possibilities of using Karelian are almost as good as non-existent. Yet important steps have already been taken to widen the use of Karelian in the public domains of religion and broadcasting. The Bible is being translated into Karelian: the New Testament and the Psalms have already been translated into Olonets Karelian, the translation of the Old Testament has started, and the New Testament is currently being translated into Viena Karelian. There also is a Karelian translation of Orthodox liturgy, which will be available for church services in the very near future. The Karelian Language Society is currently negotiating with the state broadcasting company YLE on weekly broadcasting time for Karelian language programmes. Beginning in May 2011, the Karelian Language Society publishes a monolingual Karelian monthly newspaper, *Karjal žurnualu*, which aims at focusing on contemporary and actual issues such as the revitalisation of Karelian in Finland and Russia, modern Karelian culture, present-day life of Karelians and today's activities of Karelian organisations.

Karelian in the education system. At the moment Karelian is not taught in schools but there is a plan to start it again in Tohmajärvi and Nurmes; in the latter the first Karelian language nest has functioned since 2009 and Karelian was already taught as a subject at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. There also is an initiative by the Karelian Language Society for producing schoolbooks and further teaching material in Karelian for the instruction of the Karelian language itself as well as for a few other subjects. The Chair of Karelian was founded at the University of Eastern Finland in 2009 and so today Karelian is to some extent used in higher education.

Age structure of speakers. There is no official or scholarly information on the age structure of the speakers of the Karelian language in Finland. The standard assumption is that the majority of the speakers of Karelian in Finland are elderly people. Yet, it has been revealed that there still is a remarkable number of younger generation Karelians who use their heritage language sometimes, or at least understand it well or fairly well.

Revitalisation. Since the 1990s there have been active and very conscious efforts by various Karelian societies and especially by the Karelian Language Society to revitalise Karelian in Finland, to have it accepted as a language with an official status, and to defend the linguistic rights of its speakers. This process is carried out in a highly professional manner by investing in early language learning and in adult instruction, by advancing the oral and the literary use of Karelian in as many domains as

possible (social life, media, education and church), and not least by creating a respectable amount of language-products such as books, audio books, the Karelian radio, music recordings, online fora, films, Karelian-language plays and a wide variety of language courses.

State of revitalisation. Contrary to the centuries of Karelians being obedient subjects of their ever changing rulers – Russian, Swedish, Finnish – the present is characterised by unprecedented activity of speakers of Karelian in Finland, accompanied by high hopes of finally gaining recognition as a language and cultural minority and becoming duly supported as such. Some very promising steps, such as the statute defining Karelian as one of the traditional minority languages as defined by the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages have already been taken. Numerous further measures are either being planned or are commencing.

There is a fairly high number of activists – language activists, authors, non-fiction writers, musicians, theatre makers – and people who consider being Karelian and speaking Karelian a constituent factor of their identities. Furthermore, Karelian is slowly becoming more visible in Finland. Its status as an independent language, separate from Finnish, is gaining bit by bit understanding and recognition by the authorities as well as amongst the lay majority.

Prognosis. Given all this, the prognosis of Karelian in Finland is quite promising, despite the fact that there are several obstacles that need to be overcome. First and foremost, Karelian needs to be properly supported by legislation, and its revitalisation efforts, which so far have been financed by donations and membership fees, must be backed up by additional state subventions. Yet another obstacle is the vagueness in the demarcation of the Karelian speaking minority from the Finnish speaking majority by the majority as well as by the minority itself. In order to get Karelian properly “branded” in Finnish society in general, the Karelian speaking minority needs to be better represented in the majority media than it has so far been the case.

Significant gaps in existing research. There are several wide gaps in the research on the use and the maintenance of Karelian. No information is available on the subjective views of the speakers concerning the practical usability of Karelian, e.g., whether it is possible to speak about all topics in Karelian, or whether they feel that the literary forms of Karelian used in the current publications are good or even understandable to all speakers. Yet another gap in existing research is the lack of study of actual language use, the ways in which speakers of Karelian speak or write their language in widely varying everyday life contexts, in language courses or clubs, when writing for a municipality journal or on an internet forum, and the like. Furthermore, the consequences of their post-WWII contacts with the varieties of the Finnish language have not been investigated to any noteworthy extent at all. There is absolutely no research so far investigating the standards of literary Karelian in Finland, its lexical and grammatical characteristics in general and especially in comparison with and contrast to the literary Karelian standards used in Russia. Furthermore, no research has been conducted on the relative proportions of those who actually speak Karelian in Finland and those who only understand it, nor is there any systematic research on the age structure of the speakers of the Karelian language in Finland. The data collecting methods and the information currently available on the number of speakers of Karelian in Finland have not been scholarly evaluated nor have the data collecting methods been critically assessed either. In summation, many types of research concerning the current linguistic and sociocultural situation of the Karelian minority in Finland are needed.

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